

**The Depiction and Development of the Knight Hero in  
Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival***

Robert L. Stamper

German 6100

Dr. Alexander Sager

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## Introduction

Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic poem *Parzival* stands as one of the richest and most profound literary works to have survived from the middle ages. Lost in obscurity for centuries until rediscovered and republished by Karl Lachmann in 1833, the poem enjoyed at least as great a popularity when it was first composed as it does among today's readers: Some eighty manuscripts have been preserved, in whole or in part, from Wolfram's era (Poag 40). Among the more intriguing aspects of the work is Wolfram's handling of the depiction and development of two of the story's primary characters, the knights Gahmuret and Parzival, father and son. Central to the action of the text from its inception, yet never sharing a scene, these men function as the poem's heroes—larger-than-life figures of extraordinary strength, skill and courage whose remarkable achievements and bravery carry the momentum of the story. These men represent the classic knightly warriors of old who (at least ideally) dedicated their energies and passions above all else to the noble pursuit of fame, honor and valor. Indeed, in the course of discussing heroic development in *Parzival*, one must also note the main characters' chivalric development, as their natural proclivity and tendencies as knights are clearly reflected and reinforced in their heroic manner and mien.

In the course of this investigation I wish to analyze the ways in which Wolfram depicts these knightly heroes and their development. In this way I shall attempt to achieve a better understanding of how Wolfram—and, by extension, the men of his time—themselves understood the themes and events he describes. I shall also include the critical perspectives of scholars whose have previously come to grips with the question of the hero and with Wolfram's magnum opus. I hope at least to do justice to what I have come to see as a beautifully engrossing, and timeless, work of art.

## Background and General Characteristics of the Poem

Little is known of Wolfram's life; even the dates of his birth and death are uncertain (Hasty ix). Perhaps for this reason, Poag begins his biographical discussion of Wolfram with an extended description of life under the reign of Frederic Barbarossa (13). Due to the paucity of reliable sources (outside the scant information given by Wolfram in *Parzival* itself), scholars are left largely to surmise and suppose what kind of man Wolfram was and how he lived. André Lefevre recognizes that Wolfram was himself a knight, as the poet reminds his audience on several occasions (vii). He was, furthermore, a *ministeriale*—one of the poorer class of knights without significant land holdings or an important title—in a society and era in which knights were, for various political reasons, being increasingly denied the influential duties and responsibilities which were their *raison d'être* (vii-viii). The intensifying societal disadvantages with which knights of his day had to contend may help explain why Wolfram depicts his fictional knights as nobler, essentially, than members of the nobility of his day. Lefevre goes on to assert convincingly that much of Parzival's action and plot stems from the marginalization of honor and loyalty which Wolfram must have experienced; that is to say that, in order to respond to a world in which the tenets of his life were either threatened or completely disregarded, Wolfram “constructed an alternative world in his works [. . .], and one that looked almost impossibly bright. [. . .] He simply, quixotically and earnestly calls for a return to the ‘true’ ideals of ‘real’ knighthood” (xi). Thus Parzival is distinguished by the ardor with which the poet depicts a kind of ideal chivalric world, in which knights and their honorable pursuits are still worthy of painstaking attention and exhaustive examination. (Sacker, on the other hand, discredits this ascription of wistful zeal to Wolfram's *modus operandi*, arguing that “[t]he conventions of Arthurian romance

never existed in real life anyway, but were from the first a literary fiction” [x].)

Made up of some 25,000 lines of verse divided into 16 books, *Parzival* stands as the best preserved work of that period of prolific literary production in medieval Germany referred to as the *Blütezeit* (Poag 40). In the poem, Wolfram appropriates and extends previous Arthurian heroic legends such as those written by Hartmann von Aue and, as a more direct predecessor, Chrétien de Troyes’ unfinished romance *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal* (Hasty ix). Wolfram’s “knowledge, though broad, appears to have been unsystematic” (Poag 27); his “learning was vast, if not always deep,” and, though the epic was in all likelihood composed orally, Wolfram was by no means illiterate (Lefevre xxi). Sacker in 1963 complained of “the total lack of an extensive introductory work in any language” to guide readers through Wolfram’s complicated story and torturous language (ix), a telling comment on the tremendous pace with which *Parzival* scholarship has accelerated in the ensuing three decades.

### **The Knight Hero in *Parzival***

Throughout *Parzival* we see recurring tendencies and qualities in the development of Wolfram’s central male characters, Gahmuret and Parzival, as they pursue lives of knightly glory. In order to explore these heroes and their development, it is important to determine first exactly those qualities most closely and fundamentally associated with the traditional knightly hero. A concise study of the complete heroic development of even these two primary characters in *Parzival* would be an awesome undertaking, beyond the scope of my study; instead, I wish to examine the manifestation of chivalry in the epic’s heroes in light of certain concrete conceptions of precisely how such heroes should (or, at least, are wont to) behave.

Apart from recognizing that the hero is someone who “has found or done something beyond the normal range of experience” (Flowers 123), Joseph Campbell, certainly an expert on the depiction of the hero throughout literature, succinctly asserts that “[t]here were five virtues of the medieval knight: temperance, courage, loyalty, courtesy, and love” (Cousineau 110). Specific examples from Wolfram’s epic illustrate Parzival’s and Gahmuret’s adherence to these ideals, and the paths they travel in pursuit of them.

For example, several of these knightly moral standards are described early in the poem when they are attributed to Gahmuret of Anjou, Parzival’s father, whose story fully dominates the epic’s *Vorgeschichte*. Here Gahmuret evinces a compulsion to leave the safety and comfort offered him by his older brother, who through primogeniture has ascended to their father Gandein’s throne. The life of a vassal simply holds no appeal for Gahmuret, though his brother generously provides him with what amounts to a fortune and a small army. The call of his heroic nature is too strong; he cannot simply subdue or suppress his natural drive to fight for and acquire knightly honor. He chooses to leave a haven of security and tranquility—and, significantly, to forsake loyalty and love for his brother the King—in favor of battle and conquest in a world of the unknown.

Upon his departure Wolfram gives us insight into some of the fundamental qualities of his hero (as translated in verse by Mohr):

Gahmurets Art zeichnet das:  
Er hielt in allem rechtes Maß  
und ohne abzuirren.  
Kein Lob konnt’ ihn verwirren,  
wenn man ihn ehrte, wars ihm leid,  
er mied die Überheblichkeit.  
Doch tat ihm nicht Genüge,  
wer irgend Krone trüge,  
König, Kaiser, Kaiserin,

der ihm des Dienstes würdig schien,  
denn jener, der in jenem Land  
wäre als Höchster anerkannt.  
Das war sein Wunsch und Herzens Rat (13.3-15).

Unlike his sense of loyalty and love, Gahmuret's dedication to moderation and modesty as described here are perfectly in keeping with Campbell's knightly ideals. It first becomes evident at this stage that the need for personal heroic achievement in the shape of daring adventure is an overriding concern for a knight, superseding the more quotidian considerations of, in this instance, *triuwe* to family.

Gahmuret quickly finds the adventure he seeks in the service of the Baruch at Alexandria; later, he vanquishes the armies besieging the castle of the beautiful Moorish Queen Belakane, and they marry. Though with her he has attained fame, glory and a family (siring the checkered son Feirefis)—fulfilling the demands of love and courage—the hero again grows weary of the comfortable life at home, and, demonstrating a hierarchical understanding of the importance of loyalty, leaves his new, "heathen" family in search of further glory. Ruling as King over Assagog and Zazamank is insufficient to satisfy his *gelust*. The knightly quest here impels him ineluctably on; in deciding between the competing values of abiding love for his wife and the manifestation in action of a warrior's courage, he again elects the more daring and dangerous. "Courage," at least the courage to wage war against a foe (as opposed to the less glamorous, apparently unthinkable courage involved in choosing to create a successful family life at the expense of personal renown), is the victor in this battle of will.

Gahmuret enters a tournament against King Kailet in Spain and is victorious; Queen Herzeloide witnesses his feats of fearlessness and gallantry, wins his heart and marries him. Despite the fact that he has already given himself to Belacane, and despite

the strength of his new love, Gahmuret feels compelled to again press on. He leaves Herzeloide (with a "heart of sorrow"), returning to the service of the heathen Baruch. Gahmuret is then killed in battle, and the Baruch directs that a great tomb be dedicated to the memory of the fallen warrior. Thus his life ends in a manner befitting a knightly hero: He dies in brave service to a leader to whom he has sworn (quite literally) undying loyalty. Nevertheless, the cases of his bravery in armed conflict are preceded by the rejection of loyalties made eternal through marriage oath, an interesting comment on the place of such matrimonial faith in the life of Wolfram's hero.

Though, as Campbell points out, Wolfram "jumped the circle of the Christian tradition and recognized Islam as the sister religion of Christianity" in having Gahmuret leave his home to fight for the Caliph of "Baldac" (or Baghdad), the knight's jumping the bond of his marriage presents a puzzling quandary (Cousineau 107). Were Gahmuret in fact to recognize and promote such a ground-breaking understanding of the universality of Western religion, one might also expect him to demonstrate a modicum of faith in the relationships made holy by those churches. In an argument less admiring of Gahmuret's religious philosophy, one might also maintain that the bond between the knight and the black queen Belacane is never truly sacrosanct as it involves a non-Christian. In any event, the selectivity with which Gahmuret carries out his knightly duties calls into question his devotion to them *in toto*. Clearly some noble values (at least as codified by Campbell) are weighted unequally in Gahmuret's conception of chivalry, thus providing a curious twist on his development as the epic's introductory hero.

In the figure of Parzival, Gahmuret's son with Herzeloide, we see a continuation of some of these rudimentary chivalric themes. Try as she might to shelter her son from the violent pursuit of knightly honor and glory (and from his heritage), Herzeloide is

eventually unable to prevent completely his having any contact with the outside world. "[. . .] he had the spirit and the heart, the noble heart of his father. He was a born knight, though he didn't know it," Campbell remarks (Cousineau 108). In his adolescence he encounters traveling knights in search of adventure, and, fascinated by them and their way of life, he leaves Herzeloide to seek membership in the order of King Arthur's Round Table. Though Parzival cannot be expected to adhere closely to a knightly code with which he has no experience, much is made in the literature of his noble *art*—the heroic nature which, as with his father, impels him to become a knight. In leaving his mother for parts and adventures unknown—an act which kills her—what may be seen as Parzival's disregard for, in this case, maternal loyalty has horrific consequences for the young hero. The self-centered need for achievement and fame again destroys a hero's family.

Parzival eventually reaches Arthur's kingdom and, despite his fool's attire, is knighted. Later, like his father before him, Parzival comes to rescue, fall in love with and marry a Queen (Kondwiramur) whom he finds besieged, demonstrating admirable courage. Also like his father, Parzival then proceeds to leave a "quiet" life with his loving Queen in favor of adventure. The respect Parzival displays for chivalry (and specifically, what I see as the more dangerous aspects of chivalry) are rewarded in his election to succeed Amfortas as the Grail King (Campbell, *Myths* 163). Campbell argues:

The healing of the maimed king [. . .] could be accomplished only by an uncorrupted youth *naturally* endowed [that is, endowed by nature with greatness] who would merit the supreme crown through his own authentic life work and experience, motivated by a spirit of unflinching noble love, enduring loyalty, and spontaneous compassion. (*Myths* 163)

Especially by this point in Parzival's story, I for one am less convinced that his loyalty is as "enduring" as it should be. Though here the knight's expression of "unflinching noble love" is appropriate and necessary, it is remarkable that such love was less than immediately forthcoming for the dependents he chose to accept as his kin.

Parzival's development as a knight hero is also characterized by battles with knights of strength and skill roughly equivalent to his own, specifically in his fights with the noble knight Gawain and, later, with Parzival's pagan half-brother Feirefis ("an allegorical reference to the two opposed religions of the time, Christianity and Islam: 'two noble sons,' so to say, 'of one father' [Campbell, *Myths* 166]). In both these cases the adversary's identity is unknown to the knights until the battles' conclusion; thus we see here not so much a contest between light and dark or good and evil, but instead between kinsmen and comrades, fighting—albeit unaware—to vanquish an opponent purely in the name of courage, glory and fame. Thus truly honorable heroes (at least as depicted relativistically in the narrative) are never put in the awkward position of submitting to or vanquishing an adversary of equivalent heroic honor. A slightly different variation on this theme takes place in Book Five, when in the name of honor Parzival defeats the mean-spirited Orilus in battle, spares his life, and then reconciles him with his wife Jeschute—yet never learns his true identity (Weigand 163).

As an intriguing sidelight to these depictions, the reader notices that opulent displays of wealth serve to indicate and reinforce status both for members of the nobility and for knights. Such treasures may include elaborate clothing, bejeweled armor and weaponry, as well as lands, kingdoms and (as seen with Gahmuret and Parzival) beautiful, royal women. Because wealth is a prize to be won in knightly combat, material rewards tend to reflect and underpin the honor and glory a knight hero has won

through acts of bravery and valor. Image is thus closely tied to a warrior's real sense of honor. *Schein* and *Sein* are both essential components of a knight's power.

## **Conclusion**

Campbell's conception of the knightly hero's code is useful and, to be sure, quite accurate in many instances. Nevertheless, using it as a counterpoint for the action of Parzival, one may come to a greater understanding of Wolfram's own conception of the limits and nature of the knight's life. It must be noted that, in terms of creating an intriguing narrative, Wolfram was most wise in allowing his knights some leeway in adhering to certain ideals. Were his heroes to live exclusively in keeping with a code such as Campbell's, the story of Parzival would have been much changed indeed. Campbell, in defining the knight's basic characteristics, omits an aspect of knightly behavior (at least as conducted by the heroes of *Parzival*) which is as essential to the efficacy of the poem as it is to the preservation of the knightly legend: The relentless, mortal drive to dare, to fight and to achieve. The glory that attends such pursuits, though not always attained thorough strict maintenance of precepts such as Campbell's, is—and perhaps for that very reason—the stuff of great literature.

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